

JAMES LANKFORD
OKLAHOMA

COMMITTEES:
FINANCE
ETHICS
INTELLIGENCE
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE:
316 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-5754

OKLAHOMA CITY OFFICE:
1015 NORTH BROADWAY AVENUE, SUITE 310
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73102
(405) 231-4941

TULSA OFFICE:
401 SOUTH BOSTON AVENUE, SUITE 2150
TULSA, OK 74103
(918) 581-7651

May 4, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I write to express concern about the Department of State's current policies pertaining to the processing of passport applications. This is a vitally important function of the federal government that directly affects the lives, plans, and finances of millions of Americans. The current approach has led to an application backlog of more than 3 million, which far exceeds pandemic-era levels. This is unacceptable and your leadership is needed to implement changes as soon as possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic is over and Americans have resumed their normal lives, including plans for international travel. On April 10, President Biden ended the national emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the Department of State has found itself unprepared to address this surge from both a personnel and technology standpoint. This is now the fourth year in a row where my constituents are facing significant delays for their passport applications and renewal requests. It is clear that the Passport Services Directorate is plagued by systemic problems that are in need of comprehensive reform in order to deliver for the American people.

On March 18, 2020, the Department of State suspended normal operations in the Bureau of Consular Affairs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included a pause in passport processing. This policy led to massive delays for my constituents and ultimately produced a backlog of 1.7 million applications in June 2020. In response to this problem, Secretary Pompeo implemented a variety of changes recommended by myself and colleagues, which ultimately brought the average processing time for passport applications to 4-6 weeks in the fall of 2020.

Unfortunately, it has come to my attention that the current processing time for a routine passport or passport renewal application is 14-16 weeks – nearly three times as long as the fall of 2020, the height of the pandemic. In addition to these concerning delays, the current backlog of 3 million applications far exceeds the pandemic-era peak of 2.2 million. This backlog will continue to grow over the coming months since the number of incoming applications exceeds the number of outgoing passports. Additionally, the Department is not publishing the size of the backlog on the State Department website, which the Trump Administration did regularly through the end of September 2020.

From my assessment, there are three key challenges that are compounding these ongoing delays: insufficient technology infrastructure, insufficient staffing, and insufficient in-person adjudication appointments. First, the technology infrastructure has failed to deliver for the American people. A recent State Department Inspector General Report found that Consular Affairs did not effectively manage its responsibilities related to passport IT modernization activities, and that inter-departmental planning lacked project management processes, timelines, and milestones for key implementation decisions.¹ This is discouraging for many of us who worked to secure funding and language in the State and Foreign Operations appropriations bill for this very purpose. Most notably, the Department launched an “Online Passport Renewal” (OPR) tool several months ago, which failed to function properly and resulted in the misplacement of tens of thousands of applications. Additionally, the passport status tool has not provided sufficient information to Americans about the status of their application, which has led many of them to call the NPIC and wait on hold for long periods of time, or reach out to their Congressional office seeking assistance. It is vital that we modernize these tools to improve the customer experience and reduce pressures on the workforce to respond to urgent inquiries.

Second, the insufficient staffing has inhibited the Department’s productivity in processing passports. While I am glad to hear that all employees have fully returned to work in-person, I am convinced that more productivity is needed outside of normal operating hours. The status-quo is unacceptable and requires an “all hands on deck” approach from the Consular Affairs workforce, including overtime and weekend shifts, as well as utilizing employees from other offices and divisions.

Third, the insufficient in-person services are particularly challenging for my constituents. While I understand that in-person adjudication appointments are the least efficient method for the Department to process applications, it is ultimately the only method for people who have imminent travel plans. My office has worked with dozens of Oklahomans whose applications were lost in the process, and ultimately needed to drive to Denver or Dallas to have their application adjudicated in-person. I am concerned that the number of in-person appointments presently offered at the 26 regional passport agencies fall well short of pre-pandemic levels, and that the ability of individuals with emergency cases to come by on a walk-in basis has also been curtailed. We must increase these options so that Americans can receive the services they need.

I urge you to address these issues before the problem gets worse. As such, I respectfully request responses to the following questions within 30 days.

- How many adjudication appointments are currently being offered at the 26 regional passport agencies across the country, and how does the number of appointment offerings compare to 2019 levels?
- Have all 26 regional passport agencies resumed the practice of allowing walk-ins at their facilities, which was permitted prior to the suspension of normal operations on March 18, 2020? If not, what is the plan and timeline to return this practice to pre-pandemic levels?
- What challenges is the Department facing in securing the participation of its workforce to work overtime and process applications around the clock?

¹ [*Inspection of the Bureau of Consular Affairs' Passport Services Directorate*](#). Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of State

- What challenges is the Department facing in bringing on new hires, including contract hires, to address this challenge?
- Does the Department plan to reimburse individuals who paid for expedited service and did not receive it?
- What is the Department's plan to improve the customer services experience at the National Passport Information Center, such as reducing hold times and developing digital solutions where customers can check on the status of their application online?
- Consistent with the practice of the previous Administration from March 2020 to September 2020, does the Department plan to release the number of pending applications online and update the figure weekly so that Congress and the public are appraised of the Administration's progress in reducing the size of this backlog?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I forward to working with you to remedy this problem.

In God We Trust,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Lankford", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

James Lankford
United States Senator